

## The Paradox of Christmas

Luke 2:1-7

December 21, 2008

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I was reading this past week about the different meanings that are given to the Advent candles that we light each week. We use the traditional meanings of hope, peace, joy and love as do many other churches, but not necessarily in that order. Other congregations identify them as the prophecy candle, Bethlehem candle, shepherd candle and angel candle.

And then there is the meaning given to them by one girl in Sunday School. The teacher was trying to help the children name the four Advent candles. They had gotten three but were stuck on the last one. The teacher said, "The candles represent love, joy, peace and..." The little girl raised her hand and said, "Love, joy, peace and quiet!"

Not much about this season represents peace and quiet, does it? It is a season of holy chaos that seems to get bigger and bigger each year. Christmas continues to make the slow move from sacred to spectacular, which is amazing when you consider how it all started. The scripture from Luke we read today is such a simple story for such a big event. Later on in the story you get the shepherds and the angels and the wise men, but for now we have this unspectacular tale, almost lost in the larger narrative. Jesus' birth is about as average as it comes. There's nothing but the ordinary here. Is there a special trick to changing the Messiah's swaddling cloths? It may have been a Divine dirty diaper, but it was still a dirty diaper. The circumstances are so basic and humble in origin that it's hard to appreciate just who it is that's being born here.

But that is what makes this story so powerful. This passage from Luke is overflowing with paradox. A paradox is something which seems ridiculous but actually contains some truth, which describes a lot of my seminary papers. The fact that the God of the universe would come to earth as a little baby is a paradox. It's the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End, the Ancient of Days, emerging as a baby who couldn't speak or feed himself or change his own swaddling cloths. Paradox. The Roman ruler at the time of Jesus' birth, Caesar Augustus, was the emperor who reigned during the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace. But it is this baby who will become known as the Prince of Peace. That's a paradox. The Messiah, who will free the oppressed, is born during a time of Roman oppression. Paradox. This baby, who is a descendant of King David, one of the richest and most successful Jewish kings, is poor in the poorest and most humble of circumstances. Paradox.

In fact, the ethos of understatement that dominates this story might seem like a paradox to those of us who equate bigger with better. The more significant the event, the more hoopla it deserves. We don't throw big parties for someone's 42<sup>nd</sup> birthday or 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary, do we? We wait for a time more significant. And what could be more significant than the birth of Christ? This should be a big deal, and yet Luke treats it like just another birth. And, if we're not careful, so do we.

I wonder if we've lost the paradox. I wonder if we have become numb to the sheer subversiveness of this story. The son of God, the King of Kings, born right under the nose of Caesar Augustus! Born to an obedient peasant girl named Mary and a faithful

carpenter named Joseph. Born in a cattle stall and laid in a feeding trough. God becomes human. That's the epitome of paradox!

But excitement can easily turn to apathy after repeating hearings. Maybe after 2000 years of publicity, the shine may have rubbed off the Christmas story a bit. When you hear a story once, it's captivating. When you hear it twice, it's endearing. When you hear it three times, it gets to be a little repetitive. But when you've heard it every year for your whole life, you can begin to take it for granted.

When we do this, when we lose the power of the paradox in this story, we also lose the mystery and wonder it holds for us. Christmas as a season is utterly dependent upon mystery for its meaning, and I don't mean that strictly from a religious standpoint. Part of the mystique that Santa Claus holds over our kids is the mystery of what he does. How does he make all those toys? How does it get down our chimney? How does he eat all those cookies and still fit into his suit? Christmas is about mystery.

I wonder what it would be like if, as adults, we beheld the Christ child with the same awe and mystery that kids hold for Santa. I believe the capacity for mystery is there, in each of us isn't it? I mean, can you explain the paradox of Christmas? Can you clarify what is happening in this story? I can't. It's a mystery in the holiest of senses.

That's the key for Christmas to remain alive in us. For so many of us, we're now at the point during Advent when we're asking, "Are we there yet?" Not because we can't wait for the birth of Jesus, but because we can't wait for it to be over! Soon will come the frenzy of unwrapping and visiting and eating, and then the holiday letdown, and then the Christmas tree takedown, and then it's January. That's almost depressing to think about, isn't it? Where is the mystery, where is the wonder in that?

I believe for the spirit of Christmas to be alive in us in January and July, we need to approach Dec. 25 with a sense of wonder. Albert Einstein said, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It's the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe is as good as dead; his eyes are closed."

The mysteries of Christ's birth remind us that life is bigger than our precise calculations and neat explanations and tidy little bows. There are so many questions this story raises for us: Why Mary? Why Joseph? Why that time and that place? Why a baby and not a soldier or conqueror? Christmas lives on in our souls as we seek answers to those questions.

That sense of wonder is important because as we move forward in life beyond Christmas, those questions don't go away. While they may fade they are replaced by more pressing questions, like "What is my purpose?" and "What is my future?" and "Where is God?" and "Are my prayers being heard?" Life is a series of questions, and without a sense of wonder and curiosity, our eyes are closed to the answers around us.

I once heard Christ's birth referred to as an "emerging miracle." I like that because it works on a couple different levels. I think we all can appreciate that life is a gift and that anytime a baby is born, a miracle emerges into this world. But that term also implies that what happens at Christmas doesn't end at Christmas. The true miracle only starts there and continues to emerge as we move forward.

Christmas is such a major happening in our church and our culture that often the beauty of the Christmas story gets treated as if it were the whole story. It's become so romanticized and sanitized that it sometimes feels like a fairy tale, a wonderful story that

provides a brief escape from the world we face every day, like some vacation from reality. But this story is only the beginning for Jesus, and it's the beginning of his entry into the world, not our invitation to escape from it.

In other words, Jesus' birth is pointing forward into something. Have you ever tried to point out something to a dog? Growing up, when I would play fetch with our dog Beaux, if he couldn't find the ball I would point to it and say, "Go get it!" But of course, the first thing Beaux would do is look at my finger, not to where it was pointing. Christmas is pointing to something, but if we may a big deal about Christmas and then lose our focus and sense of wonder afterward, we're staring at finger and not to where it is pointing.

I believe Christmas is God's message to each of us that, through the birth of Jesus Christ, we have each been given something. There is something great in each of us, something put there by God and awakened by Christ's birth. What great thing do you have within you? Maybe it's a dream, or a book, or a business, or a ministry, or a song. Normal, average, everyday people like us have something great in here. See the paradox? If we stop wondering about what God is doing in us, through us, we may never find out.

I read about a pastor who had a very interesting message on her voice mail. If she wasn't there to answer the phone, the caller got this message: "This is Pastor Montgomery. Now you say something." Christ's coming is our Creator saying to us, "This is God. Now you say something. You do something. You give something. You change something." Take what you've been given and put it to use for God's kingdom.

The mystery of Christmas doesn't end on Christmas Day. The wonder of what God is doing in our world and in our lives is ongoing. The love that the Christ child represents is still alive, right here, right now, within us. As we live that out, we take the hope and peace and joy and love of Christmas and extend it on into the bleakness of January and the cold of February and beyond. Don't let Christmas end this year. Don't close your eyes to the mysterious. Christ is coming. God is becoming one of us. A miracle is emerging. Now, you do something.